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THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement* submitted by the International Federation of Rural Adult
Catholic Movements, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2000]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A RIGHT

1. The Commission on Human Rights, in its resolution 1999/79, on the right to development, adopted at its fifty-fifth session, reaffirms that "the gap between developed and developing countries remains unacceptably wide and developing countries continue to face difficulties in participating in the globalization process, and many risk being marginalized and effectively excluded from its benefits".

2. Unfortunately, the situation is going to become even worse as the World Trade Organization (WTO) goes ahead with its plans. Extra regulations imposing free trade could further undermine the food sovereignty of these countries and cancel out the efforts to achieve sustainable development.

The right to food

3. Mr. Eide, in his study on the right to food (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1999/12), clearly underscores the urgent need to ensure food security for all. He defines this as "access by all people at all times to the food needed for a healthy and active life".

4. He recalls that the breakthrough in the right to food occurred at the World Food Summit, held in Rome in November 1996. Government representatives there acknowledged just how intolerable it was that more than 800 million people, particularly in developing countries, did not have enough food.

5. They also recognized that this situation was not a result of lack of food supplies, but of the inadequacy of household incomes, constraints in access to food and the instability of supply and demand. There are sufficient world food resources to feed the entire population of the planet. If this is the case, the solution does not lie in increasing the food supply but in improving access to it by a more equitable distribution of the means of production.

6. It seems clear therefore that in order to implement the right to food, States should take action that reflects their own specific circumstances and should develop strategies, with the participation of the populations concerned, to protect their citizens from hunger.

Food security as an aspect of food sovereignty

7. Food security can thus be considered as a natural consequence of the realization of the right to food. However, in the current context of globalization, which is essentially characterized by an increasing dependence on a deregulated world market and maximum freedom in trade, it would appear necessary, if the right to food is to be realized, to turn to another concept, namely, food sovereignty.

8. Food sovereignty is part of the right to development. That is why for many years the members of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements (FIMARC) have been paying particular attention to this issue. Together with farmers' organizations, they have been campaigning around the world for control over the essential choices with regard to the food that people in their countries will be consuming, producing or importing.

9. For these people, food sovereignty is the right to control the production, processing and marketing of food products. The right of nations to feed themselves is a right that must be defended, protected and promoted.

Food security: an unrecognized right

10. This right is today denied and flouted in many ways, such as when:

- WTO tries to control domestic agricultural practices and no longer allows people to choose and run the farming systems that are best suited to their needs;
- Countries are obliged to allow at least 4 per cent of their consumer goods to enter their internal market at lower rates of duty;
- The uncontrolled penetration of imports leads to the development of industrial agriculture at the expense of local food production, which comes up against the dumping of world surpluses;
- Production surpluses sold off cheaply after benefiting from export subsidies destroy the production capacities of countries of the South, disrupting local agriculture and marginalizing farmers in both the North and South;
- Intensive production methods destroy jobs and the environment;
- Farmers grow dependent on agrochemical and agribusiness transnationals or seed companies and food crops are replaced by speculative crops;
- Agrarian reform does not give farmers control of the land they work;
- The sovereign right of States to protect people's health is subordinated to purely commercial considerations;
- It is not possible to apply the precautionary principle to products whose health risks are as yet unknown, such as meat with hormones or products based on genetically modified organisms (GMOs);
- The use of patents is applied to the field of agriculture, thereby privatizing resources that belong to the common heritage of humankind;
- The patenting of living things and the introduction of GMOs in agriculture deprive people of their traditional means of production;
- The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) stipulates that every country can patent living species, and yet 97 per cent of all patents are already in the hands of the industrialized countries.

Food sovereignty: a social issue

11. Nations' food sovereignty and their right to feed themselves are today under serious threat from the WTO proposals. They are at the heart of a social issue where there is a clash of world-views that are clearly pursuing different objectives and which stand for completely contradictory and opposing visions of the world and of relations between human beings and between peoples.

12. For their part, the movements of FIMARC have a view of international trade based on solidarity, justice and cooperation. Their alternative to free trade is fair trade. The alternative they seek to promote is rooted in a sensible form of farming that creates jobs and respects the environment, guaranteeing the food security and sovereignty of each and every nation.

13. They defend the idea that agricultural products are not just goods like any others, since they are absolutely necessary for everybody, and that farmers are not just producers of foodstuffs but also responsible citizens who care about the quality of their environment and their products.

Implementation of the International Bill of Human Rights

14. The States that are members of WTO are also members of the United Nations. In order to preserve the food sovereignty of all peoples and guarantee the right to sustainable and mutually supportive development, FIMARC strongly urges States to bring their international trading practices into conformity with the broad principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Only in this way will there be any chance of every nation's right to determine its own agricultural and food policy being respected.
